

Rewald: spy who took the stand an imposter

By Walter Wright
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John Mason is the first CIA agent to testify in the Ronald Rewald trial who really looks the part.

But yesterday, in the latest bizarre twist in the case, Ronald Rewald said Mason isn't Mason.

And Rewald's efforts to prove that claim by getting Mason's signature on a court subpoena got his lawyers in hot water.

Tall, thin, with a gaunt face often crossed by a fleeting smile, Mason speaks in a voice so soft that even a KGB eavesdropper would have to strain to hear.

He resembles a spy out of Central Casting, a spook in the best tradition of Eric Ambler.

But Rewald's lawyers insisted he doesn't look like the shorter, chubbier "John Mason" described by Rewald as meeting him at the Hyatt Hotel in Los Angeles six or seven years ago to set up cover with Rewald for another undercover officer.

They offered no proof other than Rewald's word for their claim.

"A gimmick," stormed U.S. District Judge Harold Fong when Rewald's lawyers asked for a handwriting sample to make Mason prove he was Mason.

Fong said he was satisfied the man was who he said he was.

And Fong revealed he had refused the request for a handwriting sample in a closed hearing Wednesday.

Part of his concern, the judge said yesterday, was that a CIA officer's handwriting is an identifying characteristic that could endanger him or others if it fell into the wrong hands.

It is for that reason that many of the handwritten signatures and words in some formerly secret documents being revealed in the Rewald trial are blacked out, Fong said.

Ridiculous, Federal Public Defender Michael Levine said. Mason has now retired after 25 years in the clandestine branch of the CIA, and is allowed to openly sign his name to many things, including credit card receipts.

And despite the court's refusal to order Mason to sign his name, Levine managed to get a copy of Mason's signature by having an aide serve Mason with a subpoena outside the courtroom Wednesday afternoon.

Although witnesses' signatures are not normally required on a federal court subpoena, Levine had a line typed onto the back of a copy of the subpoena for a signature and had his investigator, Charles Rose, ask Mason to sign. Mason did.

When Fong found out about that yesterday, he ordered Levine and Deputy Federal Public Defender Brian Tamanaha to explain why they shouldn't be held in contempt of court for unethical conduct.

A hearing on that matter will be held after the trial, whether Rewald is found guilty or not.

Fong ordered the subpoena with Mason's signature, and any copies made, turned over to the government for immediate destruction. Levine said no comparison was made.

Levine, noting that Tamanaha already faces the threat of a personal fine by the court for filing what the court calls repetitive motions without new grounds, then asked that they be relieved of their court appointment to represent Rewald.

He said they felt intimidated by the court, the prosecution, the CIA and all the security restrictions surrounding the evidence and could not give Rewald the defense he deserved.

Fong said no.

When the uproar was over, Tamanaha went back to work in the courtroom, picking out conflicting dates and statements in an attempt to prove that the CIA told Rewald to set up Bishop Baldwin for a cover.

That wasn't true, Mason said.

Then, excused by the court, Mason left the witness stand. For a moment, a faint smile crossed his lips.

And the next time anyone looked around, John Mason wasn't there.